

SUPREME COURT OF TENNESSEE

State of Tennessee v. Henry Lee Jones

450 S.W.3d 866 (Tenn. 2014) · No. W2009-01655-SC-DDT-DD · Decided September 25, 2014

SUMMARY

The Tennessee Supreme Court reviewed the convictions and death sentences of Henry Lee Jones for the murders of Lillian and Clarence James. The court held that evidence of an out-of-state murder was improperly admitted under Tennessee Rule of Evidence 404(b) because it was not sufficiently distinctive to qualify as a signature crime and its prejudicial effect outweighed its probative value. The court reversed the Court of Criminal Appeals and remanded for a new trial.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Gary R. Wade, Chief Justice; Janice M. Holder; Cornelia A. Clark; William C. Koch, Jr.; Sharon G. Lee
JURISDICTION	Tennessee
DECIDED	September 25, 2014
DOCKET	W2009-01655-SC-DDT-DD
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Automatic appeal from convictions for two first degree premeditated murders and two first degree felony murders, with two death sentences. The Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed, and the Tennessee Supreme Court granted direct review.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Sufficiency of the evidence is reviewed under whether any rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements beyond a reasonable doubt, viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the State. Evidentiary rulings under Tennessee Rule of Evidence 404(b) are reviewed for abuse of discretion when the trial court followed the Rule's procedures. Harmlessness is reviewed under Tennessee Rule of Appellate Procedure 36(b).
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Tennessee Supreme Court opinion; precedential.
PARTIES	Henry Lee Jones v. State of Tennessee

TOPICS

character evidence

evidence

criminal procedure

harmless error

appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal law

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the evidence was sufficient to support Jones's convictions for the first degree premeditated and felony murders of Lillian and Clarence James.
2. Whether evidence concerning the separate murder of Carlos Perez was admissible under Tennessee Rule of Evidence 404(b) to prove identity.
3. Whether the erroneous admission of the Perez-murder evidence was harmless.
4. Whether portions of evidence concerning the Perez investigation could potentially be admitted on remand as contextual background.

HOLDINGS

1. The evidence, including corroboration of accomplice Tevarus Young's testimony, was sufficient for a rational trier of fact to find Jones guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of the first degree premeditated and felony murders of the Jameses.
2. The trial court abused its discretion by admitting evidence of the Perez murder to prove Jones's identity because the similarities between the crimes did not establish a sufficiently unique and distinctive signature crime.
3. The erroneous admission of the Perez-murder evidence was not harmless because it more probably than not affected the outcome of the trial.
4. Evidence concerning another crime may be admissible to provide contextual background only if its absence would create a chronological or conceptual void, the void would likely cause significant jury confusion, and the probative value is not outweighed by unfair prejudice.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Before multiple offenses may be said to reveal a distinctive design, and therefore give rise to an inference of identity, the ‘modus operandi employed must be so unique and distinctive as to be like a signature.’” (slip op. at 31)

“In the absence of sufficiently distinctive characteristics amounting to a signature crime, the danger of unfair prejudice created by the detailed evidence of the Perez murder clearly outweighed any probative value.” (slip op. at 37)

“The use of limiting instructions to the jury would also be appropriate in this situation.” (slip op. at 38)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Henry Lee Jones was prosecuted for the 2003 killings of Lillian and Clarence James in Bartlett, Tennessee. The victims suffered multiple neck injuries, including incision wounds and evidence of strangulation, and property was taken from the residence. The State relied substantially on accomplice Tevarus Young's testimony, which was corroborated by witnesses, surveillance and purchase records, vehicle evidence, physical evidence, and medical testimony. The trial court also admitted extensive evidence concerning the separate Florida murder of Carlos Perez, finding that the crimes shared a distinctive modus operandi.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Jones was indicted in Shelby County for the murders of Lillian and Clarence James. The trial court admitted evidence concerning the separate murder of Carlos Perez under Tennessee Rule of Evidence 404(b), and the jury convicted Jones and imposed two death sentences. The Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed, but the Tennessee Supreme Court held that the Perez evidence was improperly admitted and that the error was prejudicial, reversing the convictions and remanding for a new trial.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Reverse the convictions and remand to the trial court for a new trial and further proceedings consistent with the opinion. On remand, any evidence concerning the Perez murder offered as contextual background must satisfy Tennessee Rule of Evidence 404(b) and the contextual-background requirements described in *State v. Gilliland*. The State may again seek the death penalty.

CASES CITED

- *State v. Dorantes*, 331 S.W.3d 370 (Tenn. 2011)
- *State v. Vasques*, 221 S.W.3d 514 (Tenn. 2007)
- *Jackson v. Virginia*, 443 U.S. 307 (1979)
- *State v. Hanson*, 279 S.W.3d 265 (Tenn. 2009)
- *State v. Collier*, 411 S.W.3d 886 (Tenn. 2013)
- *State v. Bane*, 57 S.W.3d 411 (Tenn. 2001)
- *State v. Leach*, 148 S.W.3d 42 (Tenn. 2004)
- *State v. Kiser*, 284 S.W.3d 227 (Tenn. 2009)
- *State v. Parton*, 694 S.W.2d 299 (Tenn. 1985)
- *State v. Dotson*, 254 S.W.3d 378 (Tenn. 2008)
- *Old Chief v. United States*, 519 U.S. 172 (1997)
- *Michelson v. United States*, 335 U.S. 469 (1948)
- *State v. Bunch*, 605 S.W.2d 227 (Tenn. 1980)
- *State v. Moore*, 6 S.W.3d 235 (Tenn. 1999)

- State v. Toliver, 117 S.W.3d 216 (Tenn. 2003)
- State v. Gilliland, 22 S.W.3d 266 (Tenn. 2000)
- State v. Rodriguez, 254 S.W.3d 361 (Tenn. 2008)
- State v. Sexton, 368 S.W.3d 371 (Tenn. 2012)

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